

like they know the score by returntosaturn

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Summary:

He remembers overhearing Dustin say something once not too long ago, about how things were changing. Shifting. Of course he was right. But he knows, now, when Nancy slips her hand into his, that change, wherever it takes all of them, doesn't necessarily need to mean something bad.

// Nancy tells Jonathan she's pregnant near the end of their senior year. The aftermath.

like they know the score

March, 1986

Write about a story of sacrifice in your family.

The admissions essay prompt reads as if it were made for him. Made for *them* .

It would've been ironic if it weren't so damned easy.

And somehow he still can't decide exactly what he wants to say.

It isn't that he's anxious about the essay being good enough. He feels confident enough in his writing skill, and his portfolio has already been submitted. He's got Nancy to help spell check and make sure everything makes sense and flows nicely...

He's more concerned with what story he wants to tell.

There's several instances that come to mind first. (Probably not something to be proud of).

Everybody's got shit parents and a shit home life, he knows that. That story isn't unique. He isn't technically—legally—allowed to even mention banishing monsters to a radioactive underworld, his brother playing pawn to a hive mind, the weapon in the form of a little girl with a buzz cut, who even now, three years later, is considered government property and something to be done away with.

Of course he couldn't write about any of that. No one would *believe* that.

But the story within all of that...maybe that was a story worth telling.

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"I think I've got an idea of what I want to say...but I don't know how to say it...I guess." He pushes the door of his locker closed. The lock snaps slowly into place.

“Well...I’m interested to see what you come up with.” She shrugs her books tighter into the crook of her arm and smiles up at him. But it’s thin, forced. He sees the way it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

He falters, suddenly embarrassed that he’s been going on about himself. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She shrugs and turns away from him to make her way down the hall, cueing him to follow.

“Something happen? Your mom?” He drops his voice. “Barb? You know you talk to me...”

“Hey!” It’s almost a snap, and he’s taken aback just a bit. “Everything’s great, ok? Don’t worry about it. Everything’s....wonderful.”

She gives a tight, pinched smirk and is gone, ducking through the doorway of her homeroom before he can say another word.

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He says nothing else about it at lunch, when she meets him at his car, in a mood that appears slightly better, a little more authentic.

In the back of his mind, he wonders if she expects him to drop it if she can put on a good enough act. But it could just as easily be a passing mood, a fleeting thought that made her...remember, pulling her back down to...wherever.

He knows the look, and he knows when not to press. Will had taught him that much.

“You wanna study tonight?” he chances. “I’ve gotta start an outline for this essay. Get my thoughts together.”

“I’ve got plans with Lacey. We’ve got to finish that review for chem.”

“I thought your chem test was today.”

“Oh. Mm, yeah I meant we're going shopping.” She pinches her eyes closed and scrunches her nose while she works out the words, and he knows what that face means. He’s just never seen it directed at him. Her mom, Steve, Murray Bauman, but not him. Not that he can recall.

“Okay,” he forces out, looking off toward the field, resting the remnants on his sandwich against his knee.

The bell rings, and it’s his turn to wield the silence while they retreat back inside the building, hands in their coat pockets.

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He goes to the library, alone, to start working and gets about three paragraphs out before everything starts to feel disingenuous and forced.

The funny thing about the prompt is that it wasn’t his sacrifice he’s writing on. Jonathan, who thought he was helping by taking an extra shift and missed the fact that his brother had never made it home. Jonathan, who while things were going to complete shit in his family had run off across state lines to conjure a story against the lab, well intended but at the sake of being nearby when he knew things with Will weren’t alright.

No, he’d never been the hero. Never considered himself such or wished he was one. He did what he thought was right. But it was the others that had fought battles, lost ground, and still pressed on. It was Hopper, Steve, Will, his mom. And it was Nancy.

Nancy.

He gathers his things and stuffs the unfinished essay into his shoulder bag.

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Several Days Later...

“Jonathan! What a surprise!”

Mrs. Wheeler's typical greeting sings over the threshold. He's gotten good at shoving aside the wake of her dispassionate pleasantries.

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler. Um...Nancy left her homework in my car. I was just bringing it over." He holds the Trapper Keeper aloft.

"Oh, sure. You can go on up."

"Thanks." He inches past and ducks for the stairs.

Nancy's at her desk when he eases the door open, and looks right up at him, gaze razor sharp as always. He takes a chance at meeting her eyes, and then looks away, down at the folder clutched in his hands.

"Um, you left this in the car..." he says, then sets it on the nearest edge of her desk without even taking a step further inside the room.

"Thanks." She replies listlessly, blinking at it like she hadn't even noticed its absence.

He ducks his chin, nearly utters a goodbye and backs out again.

"Jonathan."

He looks up.

A beat passes, and for a moment they only stare. He watches her, tries to read something in her eyes before her gaze drifts down to the desktop once more, and he thinks whatever she's meant to say—whatever has been causing the distance she's measured between them—is lost.

"Nancy, is everything ok?" he says evenly. "You've been acting weird for days now. I know you lied about hanging out with Lacey. You hate Lacey. You can just tell me, whatever it is."

She doesn't appear to respond. He's torn between just leaving or pushing inside. Then she makes the decision for him by standing and moving to close the door. He steps in and watches her flick the lock before she crosses and sits pointedly at the end of her bed.

More silence. Her eyes lift to his, edged with warning. With defense.

He recognizes this look; again, one that's never been sent his way. Perhaps behind his back in the dim light of a cheap motel room, but not to his face.

"Is it something I...?"

"I think I'm pregnant."

They speak at the same time.

His heart plasters itself to the walls of his throat.

Every bit of air in the room seems to solidify, and in its place the undeniable, needling presence of reality pressing its way in. He can practically feel it seeping under the door jamb.

There's no doubt that he heard her. She doesn't look at him in wait of a response. He doesn't offer one. They both stare down at the fluffy, freshly vacuumed carpet, silent.

He speaks first, after the quiet stretches on too long to measure.

"You *think*?"

It catches in his throat, thin and pitched the way Will's voice often does now days when he's too excited or nervous. He isn't asking her to double check; he's wondering how something like this could be up for question.

She curses, nothing more than a hoarse whisper, and her head falls into her hands.

He kneels, hesitates at touching her at all before his hands falls to settle on either side of her.

"Its ok," he started earnestly. "I mean...We'll figure it out..." he manages to choke before his breath goes too thin to speak.

A knot forms deep in his throat and when he swallows to force it away, for some reason all he can think of is his father.

When he finally gets the courage to look at her, he watches a tear,

illuminated by the warm glow of her bedside lamp, drip onto the leg of her jeans.

He hangs his head.

A few moments later, after the flowers on her bedspread have blurred to indeterminable blobs, he realizes he's crying too.

Fears rush his mind but immediately he knows the answers to them have a limited scope; what were they going to do about college? She accepted an offer from Stanford in December. Her parents had been ecstatic. He was working on NYU, scrounging for finances he knew would be thin. But he could make it work. And they'd see each other. There would be phone calls. They'd make it work. There was a plan. But now...

He feels entirely selfish for so many reasons...

His hands move to grip the hem of her blouse in tight fists and fights at the sob building behind his lips.

She folds into him, or he slumps into her, it isn't really clear.

They stay like this until dusk arrives, dim and quiet and forewarning. When they pull away from each other, its as if they've been here so long, they've grown into the other like grafted vines.

He sighs. She rubs her blotchy face with the back of her hand.

He coaxes her out of her shoes and tucks her in and sits at the edge of her bed, numb and silent but there, until he's sure she's asleep. When he leaves, he tells Mrs. Wheeler not to expect her for dinner, that she wanted to sleep off a headache. Then he sits in his car until his hands feel steady enough to turn the key.

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The next day at school is quiet. He picks her up as usual, his exhaust churning hot and humid in the crisp spring morning. They don't speak during the entire ride to school. He shuts off the radio. She clutches her books to her chest and glares dead ahead into the windshield.

She stares out the window during English. He looks away when she catches him watching.

He doesn't meet her at her locker, and she doesn't come to his. He goes to his car for lunch, but she doesn't show.

After school, he finds her in the thinning crowd and shoulders up next to her.

"Hey," he says lamely.

"Hi."

She looks so... *gone*. Like she had when Barb's disappearance was fresh. Shoulders slumped, expression vacant, mouth drawn into a short, thin line. She veers away suddenly, towards her locker and twists in the code with precision.

He follows.

"How're you doing?"

He kicks himself for saying it. The last thing he wants is for her to think he's smothering her now that she's...

"Fine."

He shuffles his feet before deciding not to hold back what he thinks she needs to hear, whether she wants him to say it or not.

"Hey. I want you to know...that I'm not mad."

"That's good," she cuts dryly, shoving something inside with a clang.

"And that I'm not going anywhere."

She just nods and looks away quickly, eyes watery.

"Do...do you have like a doctor's appointment or something? I want to go with you."

This time she looks unmoved. "I'll just get my mom to take me."

“She already knows?”

She huffs and slams the door, looking up at him pointedly. “If I almost had a mental breakdown telling you, what makes you think I’ve already told my parents?”

“You should,” he says earnestly, catching her gaze and holding it. “I mean, they’re going to figure it out eventually.” His eyes flick down to where she’s clutching her jacket in an indistinct wad over her stomach. “I would hope.”

Her lips almost twitch into a smirk before they curl around a restrained sob, the fluorescents lighting up the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

“Hey.” He touches a hand to her elbow. “I can be there when you tell them. Whenever you’re ready.”

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They aren’t shouting anymore, but now he can hear them both crying and he isn’t sure if that’s better or not.

“I honestly can’t say I’m surprised,” Mr. Wheeler says from the opposite end of the sitting room. (They have a fucking *sitting room* , and he’s sitting in it, across from his girlfriend’s dad who hasn’t so much as twitched since Nancy broke the news).

He isn’t sure if he should be offended by the comment. Not that he’d dare to fire back.

“We lost touch with the kids awhile ago,” Mr. Wheeler continues. “Something like this was bound to happen. *Accidents* happen. Believe me, I know.”

Distantly, Jonathan wonders if he’s referring to his five year old daughter, born more than a decade apart from his eldest child, who’s now become part of the very cyclical constructs she hated so much.

He can’t find anything to say in response. He just feels sorry. Not that this has happened. Not that there’s already been a full on shouting match between mother and daughter and now they’ve both bolted

upstairs crying and trying to choke out apologies. He feels sorry for Mr. Wheeler.

They'll all move on and deal with the consequences, but Mr. Wheeler won't. He'll remain stuck wherever his job or his stale marriage or monotonous suburbia stole his ability to give a shit.

Jonathan looks away, ashamed.

"You're going to take care of her, right?"

He looks up again.

He isn't sure what that means. Is he passing her off? Revealing himself of the responsibility of a daughter who three years prior would've been considered the golden child. Is he giving them some sort of half-hearted blessing? Does he expect him to think it sincere?

Jonathan can't decipher it, and decides that the intention isn't half as important as his response.

He nods.

"Yes, sir, I will," he says.

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Joyce is infinitely more agreeable than Nancy's parents. Agreeable, because she doesn't cry or scream or point fingers.

"How can I help?" She says, clutching their hands.

Nancy cries into her shoulder right there in the kitchen.

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He does end up accompanying her to a doctor's appointment, and it proves to be significantly less involved than he'd expected. He sits alone in a quiet, crisp waiting room, until Nancy reappears, eyes tired and jaw set, a bulky folder of pamphlets and brochures tucked under one arm.

She falls asleep on the car ride home.

Once he gets her upstairs and tucked into bed, she nods to where she placed the info on the nightstand.

“Something in there for you...” she murmurs, and drifts off again.

He flips open the manilla cardstock, and there on top is a thin little book, maybe forty pages or so, titled *‘The Missing Branch: Becoming A Father After Living Without One.’*

He takes it with shaking fingers and sticks it into his back pocket. Then he looks at her, already fast asleep. It’s cliché to romanticize how peaceful she is like this, but he can’t bring himself to care too much.

He leans over to press his lips to her temple, to comb back a few wild waves from her face, and then slips out the door, stealthy and silent.

At home that evening, when the house has gone quiet and everyone—including Will—is sleeping, he plugs in his headphones and opens up the little book.

Once he’s read it once, drowsy but filled with some sense of untested, fragile peace, he folds it closed and tucks it into his bookshelf, nestled there safely between Vonnegut, Hemingway, and Steinbeck.

He lays awake for a little while, in the dark, in the quiet, and finds his mind drifting to a phantom vision of blue eyes and tiny dimpled fingers. A different sort of future that’s fallen into their hands. Scary. Terrifying even. Unfamiliar, but somehow not entirely unwelcome.

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Oreos. Pickles—but the little sweet kind, not the dill ones. Regular potato chips. Strawberries. And what was the other thing she asked for...?

He stares across the wide expanse of the frozen foods section, into the rows and rows of bright white lights as if they held the answers.

“Byers!”

He glances up, just in time to see Steve Harrington shove his Ray Bans back into his thick mane of hair. The badge on his work shirt glints ostentatiously in the fluorescents, and somehow he's able to make even the drab, colorless police uniform look stylish.

"Hey, man," he answers, glancing away and down into the overflowing hand basket he's toting.

"How's it going, man? Haven't seen you around in awhile." He gestures with the six pack he's got dangling from two fingers. Jonathan blanches for a moment before noting it's only Coke.

"Uh. It's good." He shifts his weight.

"Yeah? Pretty...weird assortment of snacks you got there," Steve observes, waving a hand and glancing down, amused.

"Um yeah. Long study session," he lies, gripping at the handle clamily. He wonders if Steve—Officer Harrington—is always able to make people squirm like this or if it's just him. He decides it's just him.

"Oh right. You guys have finals coming up soon," he says, in a way somehow reminiscent and proud. "How's NYU coming?"

He wants to lie. He feels heat claw at his neck, and he wants to say it's undecided or good or that there were financial complications (which wouldn't be a total lie).

But the words tangle in his throat, and come out in the form of, "Well...it's not."

"Oh." Steve looks genuinely deflated. "Bummer."

"Yeah. Bummer."

There's a beat of tense silence until Steve pipes up again.

"Nancy still going to Stanford?"

He grips at the basket with both hands, and stares a hole into the cheap tile.

“Oh, shit. Seriously? What the hell happened?”

Jonathan makes no moves to explain. The freezer section is suddenly much too warm.

“Oh. Oh. Wow.”

Jonathan gathers enough of himself to finally look up at the newest member of Hawkins Police and finds the look on his face something like shock, wonder, and remorse all in one.

He’s staring down into the contents of Jonathan’s basket, blinking.

“Well...I mean...Congratulations.”

Jonathan shifts away.

“Seriously, dude. I mean it. I...” He lifts a hand and lets it fall again. He sighs, and gives a shrug. “There’s nobody she could do this with except you. I’m glad she has you.”

It’s under his breath, but Jonathan doesn’t doubt its sentiment.

“Thanks,” he says, taking the chance to look him in the eye.

Steve nods. “Well, hey, if you guys need anything, let me know. I mean it.”

He nods and thanks him again and they slide through awkward goodbyes before parting ways.

In the car, it takes several minutes to settle himself. He waits, gripping at the keys in the ignition, until the police cruiser pulls out into the street and disappears around the corner.

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It takes until the week prior for them to decide if they’re actually going to go.

Nancy’s checked out. He knows if. There isn’t a point anymore. If there isn’t college to make the grade for, to look forward to. If there’s

only dodging glances and being merely tolerated by her peers since she...what did they say?...had a nervous breakdown.

She's withdrawn from mostly everyone, and he hates that. He's hoped she would at least enjoy the last few months before reality hit. But she's got secrets to keep.

No one cares about his rejection from NYU. No one had even heard. But Nancy Wheeler? People would assume and the truth would be out of their hands.

Maybe they need one night to just...be.

He fudges the tie—again, but irons his black button down and slacks. His jacket is wrinkled and his shoes aren't nice, but he brings her a corsage that his mom made up from baby's breath and white roses bought from the grocer's.

Her dress is blue and sleek and absolutely lovely. He tells her so.

When they arrive in the high school gym, they're playing *Here Comes The Feeling* by Asia and he thinks perhaps the night won't be so awful.

She talks a little to some girl friends, loosens up while he watches from her side, glad she's at least in good spirits.

They get punch and snack on the veggie tray courtesy of the PTA, and after an hour she's fading just a little.

Lucky Star fades to *Take My Breath Away* and it seems everyone assumes their positions on the dance floor as if this song requires it.

"Do...do you wanna dance?" he says close to her ear.

She grips his hand, a little too tight, but pulls him forward.

They stand on the fringes, and that's perfectly alright with him. Her waist still feels the same—he doesn't know why he thinks it should feel any different, not yet. But so much is different, so much isn't right...

He concentrates on her, the scent of the special perfume she's

wearing. The brush of her hair against his neck.

He knows, beyond any doubt, that they'll make this work. Or at least he knows himself well enough to know that he'll try his damndest.

He doesn't know what sort of life he can provide, but he's had a great role model who always tried to make the best of what they had.

Nancy shifts her face against his shoulder, slides a hand from around his neck to rub at her eye.

"Nancy?"

The blue string lights overhead make her eyes shine when she blinks up at him, and he can see it all there, just a breath away from spilling over while she tries to just hold herself together.

He cradles her face in both hands. "Come on, let's get out of here."

She's hardly in the car before tears are streaking over her cheeks. "I'm sorry...I'm..."

He shakes his head. "No. I'm sorry I suggested it." He takes a steadying breath, gripping at the wheel though he hasn't even started the car yet. "I thought it would be good, but..."

"I hate this so much," she admits suddenly, raw and almost too sharp in the confines of the car. "I hate..." She gasps. "I hate that she's not here... I hate that she didn't get to have any of this, but I'm still here hating every minute of it just waiting for it to end. I feel so guilty...all the time. About every single thing. I'm so scared. So scared about everything, and I don't know if I'm supposed to happy about this..." Her hands gesture to her stomach. "...or conflicted. I don't know how to feel. All I know is I'm so thankful your still here because half the time I don't know if I'm insane or ok, but you always make sense of everything and..." Another breath. "I'm just so scared, Jonathan."

His throat feels too tight to speak once she's finished, but he manages it anyway. "I know. I'm scared too."

For a moment there's nothing, just Nancy sniffing and wiping runny mascara from her eyes.

“But I know that every time things have gotten scary, we’ve taken it head on together. Maybe...maybe if there isn’t anything we can do about it, we’ll just have to be scared together.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

After a beat, her finds her hand across the gear shift, scar to scar.

“Can I take you home?”

He looks over at her, her profile silhouetted in the yellow parking lot glow. He takes a mental image.

“How much more do you think my parents would hate me if I didn’t come home?”

He considers this. “I think I’m the one they hate.” He tries to make light of it, but he doesn’t think it works.

His house is quiet and dark when they arrive, and the way she fits against him in his bed makes him believe everything he said in the car could be true.

He drives her home in the misty dawn of morning, one of his flannels pulled over her silky dress she slipped back into.

She catches him by surprise when she leans over and kisses him, soft and slow like it’s new. Their fingers brush, and then she’s gone, tiptoeing barefoot up the driveway carrying her shoes in one hand.

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When May rolls around, she isn’t showing, and it’s none of anybody’s business anyways. They’ve decided it isn’t about pretending to be normal, but keeping something special for themselves, and keeping everyone’s noses out of it.

She’s not val or sal, but she’s top of the class. He’s in the middle. Their names are at opposite ends of the alphabet, which means opposite ends of the football field.

The boys, Max, and El all rush them when they’re dismissed. Parents

demand photos— *you two together, now with us, now the kids.*

Jonathan eyes Mike and El's clasped hands on the way back to the parking lot, Will is on Mike's opposite side, chatting about something. He can't hear what they're talking about, but the image is clear.

He's noticed a change in Will. A quietness. More quiet than normal. But not exactly quiet. More like...ostracism. He spends more time in his room. More time drawing, less time with the party, as they called it.

He remembers overhearing Dustin say something once not too long ago, about how things were changing. Shifting. Of course he was right. But he knows, now, when Nancy slips her hand into his, that change, wherever it takes all of them, doesn't necessarily need to mean something bad.

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Typically, it's Will still awake at this hour. Over a year since the monster released its hold, and their lives returned as normal as they can possibly be, his brother still has nightmares. Flashbacks. Sleepless nights where he just can't switch his brain off. Jonathan hears him, sees the living room lamplight filtering down the hallway. Hears the opening and closing of the fridge, the creak of the sofa.

But tonight he's the one up past normal hours, reading again in the dim glow of the living room.

He hears soft footsteps in the hallway and looks back to see Will there, looking dazed and still half asleep. It strikes him, for just a moment, how tall Will is now. How changed in just a little over a year.

"Hey bud. Everything ok?"

"Mhm," he grumbles. "Why are you awake?"

Jonathan crosses his feet under his knees to make room when Will shuffles over. "Uh...not sleepy. Just would rather read I guess."

His brother tips his head sideways to catch a glimpse of his book

cover—East of Eden—before collapsing beside him on the sofa.

“Too late to read something like that.”

Jonathan chuckles softly. “I like it. And don’t you mean early? It’s two a.m.”

Will leans his head on his shoulder, stretches out along the couch like he might fall asleep again.

“Jonathan?”

“What’s up?”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Huh? For what?”

“I dunno. Just am I guess. Cuz you’re awesome.”

Jonathan smirks. “Are you awake or talking in your sleep?”

Will brings his knees to his chest.

“Are you really moving out?”

He turns somber. “I have to. It’d be too crowded here with Nancy and me and the baby.”

“I wouldn’t think so.” Will yawns.

“But we’re just going on the edge of town. You’ll see me all the time.”

For a moment, he thinks Will’s fallen back to sleep, right there on his shoulder, until he speaks up again.

“So...I was thinking about something.”

“Hm?”

“What if...when the time comes...What if I applied for NYU?”

Jonathan stills. “Well...it all depends on you. Would you *want* to do

that?"

"It seems like a cool place." There's a tense length of quiet before Will continues, a little more lucid now. "Sometimes I feel like I don't want to leave. Like I'm scared to because everything else is unknown. But sometimes I can't stand it here anymore."

Jonathan's at a loss. How could he assuage that fear if it was the exact one that cling to his mind every day?

"You have time," he says finally, "Lots of time to figure out who you are before then." He lets the words settle. "And whoever that is, you'll always be my favorite brother."

He smirks down at him, but Will's got his eyes closed now.

"Nancy's lucky," he says, despite his sleepy state.

He reaches over, placing a hand on his younger brother's head, ready to ruffle his shaggy mop of hair now not unlike his own. But he stops short; is it possible Will's getting too old for that?

"Hey. I'm pretty lucky too, to have a great brother like you."

"No. I think we're all the luckiest. Cuz we get to know you. And the baby will be lucky too."

It trails off into a yawn and Will tucks his hands up under his chin.

"Love you, bud," Jonathan whispers, something in his voice catching. "Hey...I think it may be time to go back to bed."

He shifts to stand up, and Will moves momentarily but slides back along the length of the cushions.

"I want to stay out here. Can't sleep in there."

Jonathan concedes without another word, and reaches to turn off the lamp.

"Can you stay out here too?"

“Alright.”

He finds two blankets in the hall closet, and by the time he’s brought them over, Will’s fast asleep. He lays down, cramped on the love seat, but eventually finds a comfortable position. In the darkness, he looks about the room, over all his mom’s knick-backs, old china that’s missing pieces, the slant of the safety light from the shed casting weird shadows into the dining room window.

He sits up, and gathers his blanket and the one hard, deflated throw pillow and settles on the floor instead, right at the foot of the sofa where Will lays.

His mind doesn’t quiet, but eventually the rhythm of his brother’s easy, gentle snoring sees him asleep.

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The camera’s mechanical grinding doesn’t do anything to help his secret, impromptu photoshoot.

“Seriously?” She huffs, turning away from the window.

“Wait, go back to....Look out the window again.” He waves a hand and then sets up a new exposure.

“Really? I’m so ugly right now...” she complains. “I look like a potato.”

“Put your hand...” He reaches, and settles her thin fingers over the little half-grown bump that’s there now.

“Beautiful.”

Click .

“Potato,” she scoffs.

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November, 1986

The evening it happens is a blur.

They're in their fixer-upper of an apartment. Nancy insists on nailing some photos up on the wall—his mom had called this 'nesting'—and he doesn't bother to protest though he watches her with a careful eye.

Then the hammer is clattering to the linoleum and she's doubling over, clutching her belly.

"I'm so scared. I'm so scared, Jonathan," she gasps while they're prepping her, nurses talking over each other and busying about the room.

"You can do this. Hey, listen. You don't retreat, remember that? You don't retreat."

"I'm scared," she hisses one more time and grips his hand til his knuckle go hot.

"Scared together, ok?" he reminds her, his own voice quivering.

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He won't remember much of anything from the evening once it's all a memory. Not until sleep and quiet are routine again.

The one moment that remains with him—even after they're home and his mom has descended on their tiny apartment, arms full of blankets and canisters of formula, insisting Nancy get some rest—is rushing out to where they've all been waiting to hear the three most anticipated words.

"It's a girl!" he says with a shrug of his shoulders beneath the papery scrubs they've given him, breathless, lightheaded, grinning because he *just can't hide it*.

His mom gasps and squeezes Hopper's hand. The chief's eyes glint in some distinct, secret way. Mike, Eleven, and Will look like a toppled stack of dominos, all dozing against each other's shoulders, but they blink awake when the room alights in congratulations, and he sees that even Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler are holding hands.

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The initial pangs of fear and worry and shame melt to quiet confidence as they slip into their new normal. They've gotten good at this...finding a new normal and realigning to it.

He doesn't realize it until his mother says something at Christmas, when Charlotte is snuggled in Nancy's arms, in a bulky little coat and a blanket, head topped with a little hat knitted by Mrs. Wheeler herself, that this season has been marked with fear for all of them. It was as if their senses all became heightened around this time, everyone on edge. But now it feels different. Now it feels like nothing can touch them. Like all of that is gone and in the past, with no chance of creeping back in.

One evening, snow is falling steadily outside, the rickety stairs outside slick with ice. They're bundled up in their little apartment, lights off and candles lit. Fleetwood Mac's *Songbird* plays on the stereo, almost like a lullaby while he paces the living room and Charlotte dozes in his arms.

Nancy smiles at him from the secondhand sofa.

And after all this time, after everything that's changed and gone awry from their assumed path, he doesn't feel wistful for what they missed. He doesn't feel like he's given up much at all.

He supposes that was the happy curiosity of sacrifice.

Author's Note:

[allscissorsallpaper](#) on Tumblr.

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I didn't mean for this to become a holiday fic, it just did, and it seemed fitting because of that time of year always being so shitty. I liked the idea of renewing. I also didn't mean for it to become this long, but there it is and I don't mind it.